

Dreaming Theatre Anew

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As socio-cultural practice and art form, theatre is an integral part of the Indian people. It is our singular good fortune that countless theatrical and semi-theatrical forms of great potential have survived radical historical changes in this country. They have not only survived but are also fast integrating into themselves aspects of social change. As art forms, the classical and folk streams of theatre have been influencing and impregnating each other for ages.

As a result of colonial contact, theatre in India received a new impetus during the last century. Drama as a genre of writing began to develop, and a theatre of pure entertainment emerged in the form of the Parsi theatre, with its tremendous impact on the urban masses.

However, the scene was soon to change with the amateur drama and theatre coming in, expressive of the aspirations of the newly emergent urban middle class. The new theatre sought to replace the older theatre of entertainment with a theatre of ideas — a process that was accelerated after independence. The new mood evoked a positive response from the Indian state, and resulted in the founding of the National School of Drama. The search for a national theatre began. A new band of playwrights emerged, together with a new set of theatre directors and technicians. This led to an increasing perfection of the craft of doing and writing plays. The National School of Drama became such a presence that several smaller versions of it began to emerge in different parts of the country. Several universities had a role in this development — which received encouragement from Euro-American sources. By the end of the twentieth century, theatre as movement as envisioned by the founders of amateur theatre has been replaced by theatre as institution, with its own self-validating systems. At the same time, in most parts of the country except for some parts of Maharashtra, the once-influential professional theatre has succumbed to the crushing impact of the cinema. In this vacuum, amateur theatre's growth in new directions has been somewhat helped, but mostly hampered, by Western-style state- or foreign-funded drama-school theatre. This middle-middle-class urban theatre, which, unlike the earlier professional theatre, is not accountable to the masses but is well entrenched in the media, now projects itself as the only model of excellence in the theatre. The drama schools, white elephants of our culture, now threaten to swallow up all other forms of theatre, old and new. Even when these schools take up plays with a reformatory or protest message, the plays are beautifully transformed into art pieces to be admired. The state-funded 'professional' theatre they promote is fast becoming an instrument of hegemony, thanks to proliferating 'festivals'.

Not that all of our theatre has taken this slippery path of self-liquidation. The excesses of the Emergency was a blessing in disguise for the theatre, for theatre as protest and movement blazed forth then. Theatre as education of the masses was reflected in the form of street theatre. However, this zeal was soon snuffed out as the ruling hegemony and foreign

powers started working hand-in-hand to appropriate the new theatre. Still, not all is lost, because in different parts of the country, those who believe in the political-cultural value of theatre are at work. However, in the absence of any new unifying enthusiasm, this endeavour now remains a thankless venture undertaken by a handful of stubborn talents.

The countless traditional theatrical forms in every part of the country have another story to tell. Some of them, like Yakshagana and Koodiyattam, have attained a very high degree of sophistication, which prevents them from being put to any better use than a cosmetic one — like drama-school productions. Some other forms, like Gujarat's Bhavai, have remarkable potential, but are being corroded by the commercial cinema, full of pelvis-centred eroticism. Semi-theatrical forms, again full of theatrical possibilities, are being abandoned both by their practitioners and clientele in an era of breathtaking changes, mostly for the worse. Like Nero fiddling while Rome was burning, the new 'folklorists', and, the institutions giving them their jobs and perks, are rolling up their sleeves to preserve these dying arts through documentation on Western lines. Incredibly huge grants are offered for such documentation, but what is documented is already dead.

In spite of every deterrent, people still love to do and watch theatre. If film could replace theatre, as the British cultural historian Raymond Williams had predicted, it would have happened in Germany, one of the biggest film-producing countries in the world. In Mumbai, people still throng to the theatre. Every city in India still has amateur groups playing to fairly filled houses. Many forms of village theatre have not yet completely lost their audience. Theatres like Yakshagana and Kathakali, for example, have huge audiences and large numbers of players. This is the ground for hope of a new theatre, which can better reflect the problems and aspirations of our fractured and threatened society. The need for it is compelling, but not much is happening to fulfil the need.

The genius of Indian theatre has by and large rejected tragedy. Our culture is essentially celebratory and optimistic. Though threatened with blinding fundamentalism and equally blinding casteisms, and even more blinding free-marketism, let us risk the desperate hope of the Shakespearean clowns and be hopeful about the future of our theatre. Let us try to dream it vividly. Let us not boast in vain about the glory of the Natyashastra or of Sanskrit drama, and still less about the new 'national' theatre, a negative model of good theatre.

How does theatre, more immanent than imminent, appear to us in our inspired dreams? It will be basically a poor theatre — poor in financial investment, but rich in human investment. It will no more be a display of technique for its own sake, but will transcend technique by the force of passion for communing with urgent truths. (Badal Sircar's kind of theatre, the best of our amateur theatre, can provide us a good starting point.) It will relate itself intensely to its own language, milieu, and people, not copying the idea of a national theatre in the guise of foreign-funded regionalism. It will draw upon the rich store of people's memories, images, symbols and forms only to break the forms and make them new in the furnace of the present. It will by necessity be the negation of drama-school theatre, of both Alkazian and Karanthian kinds. It will learn much from the masters of the new idiom, like Habib Tanvir, and delve deeper into the cauldron of the present.

Into that hope of new possibilities, dear fellow-farers, let our theatre awake.